

Miguel Leonis Adobe  
23537 Calabasas Road  
Los Angeles, Los Angeles County  
California

HABS No. CAL-342

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19. CALA

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN AND HISTORICAL DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
Western Office, Division of Design and Construction  
1000 Geary Street  
San Francisco, California

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PHOTOGRAPH-DATA BOOK REPORT  
HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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MIGUEL LEONIS ADOBE  
CALABASAS  
(Los Angeles) Los Angeles County, California

ADDRESS: 23537 Calabasas Road, Los Angeles (Calabasas)  
OWNER: Mrs. Kathleen S. Beachy  
OCCUPANT: Vacant  
USE: Proposed Historic Monument

HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Leonis Adobe has been designated by the Cultural Heritage Board of the City of Los Angeles as an historical landmark on August 6, 1962. A commemorative plaque was placed at the front of the house by the Topanga Parlor #269, Native Daughters of the Golden West on May 2, 1953.

Calabasas, a lawless place at mid-nineteenth century, was the southern spur of the stage line operated by Flint, Bixby and Butterfield between Los Angeles and Monterey. The Leonis Adobe in this area was the home and headquarters of the legendary Miguel Leonis by at least 1875,<sup>1</sup> and probably earlier. By this date he had become so powerful and notorious in the San Fernando Valley that he was commonly referred to as, "The King of Calabasas"<sup>2</sup>. This land and the adjacent Rancho El Escorpion, to the north, was part of the original Spanish grant to the San Fernando Mission.

It is architecturally notable for its combination of adobe and wood frame construction in two stories with a "Monterey Style" second floor balcony on the east and south elevations. It was a "good design for the time it was built"<sup>3</sup>.

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# HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Miguel Leonis was born in 1824 at Cambo, Basses-Pyrenees of Basque parentage.<sup>4</sup> The Great Register of Los Angeles County for the year of 1876 shows him to be a native of France with the occupation of ranchero and to have been naturalized in Los Angeles on July 15, 1867.<sup>5</sup> The Los Angeles Hall of Records indicates that, in Superior Court Case #761, a litigation occurred between Miguel Leonis and Pedro Sepulveda dated October 23, 1860. An earlier litigation with Leon Placentonio began on October 10, 1956. Miguel, himself, stated under oath at court that he came to the Valley in 1854.

In any event, we know by the Placentonio case that he was already actively engaged in his empire building by at least 1856. As a matter of record, over thirty such land dispute cases are on file.<sup>6</sup>

He was first employed as a sheep herder for Joaquin Romero, the latter having obtained a 5/12 section of land from the San Fernando Mission, which lay adjacent to the rancho El Escorpion. By shrewdness and guile, Leonis soon reversed the situation, taking advantage of Romero's weakness for liquor.<sup>7</sup> Thus began the first of many questionable dealings that was to see his empire grow and his reputation for ruthlessness and violence spread throughout the entire Valley. He was soon to become one of the most feared and respected figures in the area.

The next important episode begins with one of his journeys from the Lake Elizabeth region while herding his sheep. Leonis asked permission of the widow Espiritu Menendez (wife of the late Juan Menendez of Mexico) to feed his herd and to camp on her land. This encounter led to his eventual acquisition of the Rancho El Escorpion through his marriage with Espiritu (an Indian daughter of the Malibu tribal chief, Urbano, who with his brothers Manual and Odon had obtained the rancho by a Mexican grant from the San Fernando Mission in 1845). Having gained control of Escorpion from his Indian in-laws he now needed even more land for his increasing herds of sheep, horses and cattle. He started pushing south, bullying into submission newly arrived American settlers, claimants to former land grants of the Mexican Governor, Pio Pico, and drove from his lands and property - or land that he wanted - homesteaders foolish enough to stand in his way in this part of the Valley.<sup>8</sup>

For several years, Leonis had a formidable contingent of armed Mexicans and Malibu Indians comprising a small army that out-numbered the

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squatters. The Banks Affair demonstrates the extent to which Leonis would go to deal with those who would come in his way. A discharged soldier from the Union Army, named Banks, led a band of thirty Americans into Calabasas, attempting to settle on land claimed by Leonis. War immediately broke out. Violence and killings continued for some time. Finally, Leonis attacked with his forces on a late Sunday afternoon in one determined battle to drive out his enemy. Heavy losses forced Leonis to withdraw after some hours of fighting. However, Banks during the engagement was mortally wounded and without his leadership the Americans could not sustain their advantage - in two days they were gone. This victory was to discourage any further intrusions by others for several years.<sup>9</sup>

During the ensuing years Leonis continued to be embroiled in legal disputes over land rights and ownership, the majority of which he won often as not through the use of influence or pressure on the courts. Curiously, involved as he was in so many legal proceedings, it is known that he could neither speak English nor Spanish well and read not at all - Basque being his only fluent tongue. Because of this, he kept few written records and documents, bragging that he could keep them all in his head. This lack of legal documents was to eventually result in Espiritu's great difficulty in proving her claims to the estate. She could not in fact produce a legal marriage certificate, although Leonis had testified in the Superior Court Case #6361, filed July 22, 1887, against Andrew D. Russell (owner of El Triunpho Ranch) that she was his legal wife and that there was such a document. None is presently known to exist.<sup>10</sup>

Well known pioneers of this time whose names are associated with Miguel Leonis include Major Horace Bell, the editor of the Los Angeles Porcupine paper and an attorney who successfully prosecuted Leonis in many of his legal property disputes. The period of the 80's saw Leonis' power diminishing from drought, taxes, rustlers and losing court battles. He needed more grazing land and sought help from Porforio Diaz, the President of Mexico, to whom he unsuccessfully appealed for assistance in his land claims. His enemies were increasing in number and power; among whom were Garnier, owner of Rancho Encino and a Mrs. Anna Leffingwell who came from Santa Barbara and settled on a section of nearby Hidden Hills. The latter proved a good match for Leonis in unscrupulousness regarding property rights.

With all of the violence and ruthlessness connected with the Leonis legend, there were occasional glimpses of a softer side, particularly

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toward children. Mrs. Katie Haas, daughter of Judge Issac Ijams who came with his family to the Valley in 1884, revealed kindness of Leonis toward them. Mrs. Anna Beague de Packman also remembers his fondness toward her as a young child because, she believes, she reminded him of his daughter, Marcelina, who died at the age of twenty from small pox.<sup>11</sup>

The conclusion of this legendary figure's story came on a September evening in 1889 while returning home from Los Angeles after celebrating in the saloons there over his first court victory in nine years. Ironically, Major Horace Bell was his attorney in this case, the man who so successfully opposed him in many previous trials. The six foot four inch "El Basque Grande" was driving his team of horses through the Cahuenga Pass of the Hollywood Hills when he mysteriously fell beneath the wheels of the wagon and died as violently as he lived. The man who had dominated the San Fernando Valley by 1875 from the Malibu Hills to the San Fernando Mission, from Calabasas to Encino, and who was rightly called "The King of Calabasas" was dead at the age of sixty-five. Pioneers still remember the celebrations in Calabasas that night. Services were held in St. Vibiana Cathedral three days later, attended by a few close friends and relatives. Burial was in old Calvary Cemetery located at the later site of Cathedral High School on North Broadway in Los Angeles.<sup>12</sup>

He is survived today by the descendants of his brother, John, who pioneered and developed the City of Vernon in the southeastern suburbs of Los Angeles.

The chain of title covering the Leonis Adobe property does not, curiously, officially indicate the name of Miguel Leonis. Upon his death, Espiritu claims that the brother John made off with the deeds to the estate. Court records reveal the widow's battles with in-laws and the United States Government for a share of her husband's vast holdings. On September 20, 1905, Espiritu was finally awarded 3500 acres of land and 98.34 pesos of money as compensation by the Court.<sup>13</sup>

Her son, Juan Menendez by her previous marriage, moved into the Adobe with Espiritu the day after Leonis died. It was thereafter known as the Menendez House. He took over the management of his mother's property but, being a poor business man, he eventually lost it all by 1922.

A title search shows that Leonis claimed acquisition of Rancho El Escorpion from Odon, the Indian, January 23, 1871, which included the Calabasas property. He is "unofficially" credited with building the adobe home at least by 1875, as shown in the assessor's records.

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Under the Homestead Act of 1862, the United States issued its patent to Menendez and his wife, Juana Maria Valenzuela de Menendez (said to be Leonis' step-daughter), on May 8, 1901. An instrument recorded by their attorney, the one Horace Bell, on June 28, 1983, in book 3, page 31 of Pre-emptions, states that Juan Menendez and his wife had legally "for many years last past" resided upon the land.<sup>14</sup>

It is possible that the one-story wood framed portion of the house was built earlier and the two-story adobe later added.<sup>15</sup> The tax rolls for 1869-70 indicate as assessed to Leonis, "improvements on public land south of San Fernando Mission-adobe house with clapboard roof,...."<sup>16</sup> Albeit, by 1875 the house consisted of four rooms and kitchen downstairs and three bedrooms upstairs.<sup>17</sup> The earthen excavated cellar at the northeast corner under the stair would likely have been dug at this time. A photograph with the date 1889 on the back shows the general form of the roof and balcony as we know it on the south side and with a windmill to the northeast beyond. This picture also indicates the shed-roofed wood-framed section to the west with the tall brick chimney of the kitchen (which is still standing).<sup>18</sup>

Continuing with the chain of title, the deed next passed to Lester P. Agoure on May 25, 1922. The wife, Mrs. Frances Agoure, was interviewed during an inspection tour of the property and revealed the following conditions found at this time and the subsequent changes the Agoures made.<sup>19</sup>

Directly opposite the west kitchen door, she said, was an old shed used for grain and storage. In this area were olives and a large fig tree. They converted the shed to a greenhouse (now gone). Continuing to the north side, she stated that they extended the second floor projection (approximately 10'-3") beyond the original north kitchen wall for use as an upstairs screened sleeping porch. A two foot stone walk bordered the north wall and the north kitchen door led to a huge "dutch oven" outside, beyond which were the privy buildings. The latter would now correspond to the southerly edge of the present Ventura Freeway. Easterly, toward the still existing barn, was an open well over which was the windmill, as mentioned earlier. The east side of the building faced an orchard and an entrance road called El Canon. A huge cactus plant near the barn, believed dating back to 1842, is still growing at the date of this writing and stood behind a former wine vat structure. The underside of the second floor balcony which was of 1" x 6" boards can still be seen at the south porch. The

main entrance to the Adobe living room was from this side. Some of the original second floor balcony ceiling, which is exposed wood rafter and redwood shingled roofing, can still be seen along the south and part of the east elevations. Preliminary evidence, based upon inspection and Mrs. Agoure's statements, yields that the original balcony construction surrounded the Adobe on the south, east and part of the north elevations (to the bedroom at the northwest corner) thus giving the present stairway with its first floor porch landing an exterior effect. One would have had to go from the living room through a covered open porch to proceed either to the kitchen or upstairs balcony. Thus, the authentic restoration following this data will not only quite physically change a substantial portion of the house as now seen, but will also produce a more typical, truly "Monterey" character with much handsomer architectural proportions. Finally, the existing vertical wood siding over the south and east adobe walls appears to date about the original time of the building as also do the distinctive wood railings.

The original interior floors were mainly of 1" x 4" redwood boards most of which having been subsequently covered with hardwood by the Agoures. Some of these early floors can still be seen on the second floor balcony with its noticeable slope toward the outer edge for drainage. Other changes at this time were the opening of a door at the west adobe wall of the living room into the dining room, the addition of baths, and the sleeping porch at the north side previously discussed. The second floor bedrooms appear little altered with the minor exception of the closets. The walls and ceilings of wood lath and plaster and the roof construction, seen through the existing second floor hall attic scuttle, seem authentic. The original redwood shingled roof is now covered with rolled composition roofing.

The Hidden Hills Corporation purchased the house on May 1, 1950 from the Spinks Realty Company (which gained title from the Agoures on November 10, 1931). During the Spinks Realty period, the Adobe was leased as a sanitarium and consequently the screened sleeping porch of the Agoures was enclosed and a bedroom with bath added. The Archie E. Hansons, who were members of the Hidden Hills Corporation, proceeded to remodel and restore the building for use as their residence. They completed the eastern enclosure of the second floor balcony by adding a bedroom and bath, enclosed the front porch directly below for an office, finished the north, east and west exterior walls with wood board and batten as presently found, replaced the interior solid wood

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shutters over the windows with exterior shutters, replaced miscellaneous hardware, restored some window material (in character with the original), added exterior paving and stone work, finished some interior walls and covered floors, converted the Agore's first floor bedroom at the north side to a den, added dutch doors at the north kitchen wall and added the fireplace at the northeast corner of the living room.<sup>20</sup>

The property was next deeded to Alfred and Jean Orum on May 27, 1957, who in turn sold to Woodland Hills Building and Finance Company on July 2, 1957. The latter attempted, nearly successfully, to demolish the Adobe in order to convert the property to a shopping facility. Through the efforts of many dedicated preservationists, it was saved (just two days before planned demolition) by the Cultural Heritage Board of Los Angeles upon the submission by the Leonis Adobe Association and the Southern California Chapter, The American Institute of Architects on August 6, 1962 as the first case before the Board on its first recorded day of business, designated the Miguel Leonis Adobe as an historical landmark.

An ensuing threat was continued by the owner to demolish the building and in fact several beautiful old trees were torn down. Finally, on March 27, 1963, Mrs. Kathleen S. Beachy, a director of the Leonis Adobe Association, acquired title to provide time for the Association and civic groups to complete plans for preserving the site and restoration work for its use as an historical monument.

#### REFERENCES

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2. Ibid.
3. Withey, Henry F., FAIA - HABS Form CAL-352, May 2, 1959.
4. Montgomery, Barbara - THE TRUTH AND LEGEND OF MIGUEL LEONIS, an unpublished paper, History Dept., Loyola University, Illinois, and on file with Leonis Adobe Assn., Van Nuys, California.
5. Robinson, W. W. - INFORMATION ABOUT MIGUEL LEONIS ...., February 6, 1963, unpublished report from the files of the Leonis Adobe Assn.



6. Montgomery - above cit., p.7
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid. p. 8
9. Ibid. pp. 9-10
10. Ibid. pp. 12, 13
11. Ibid. pp. 14-18, 20
12. Ibid. pp. 14-18
13. An old copy book kept by Juan Menendez, from the historical records of the Leonis Adobe Assn., p. 175
14. Title Search document for the Hidden Hills Corporation, May, 1950
15. Montgomery, - above cit., p. 20
16. Robinson, - above cit.
17. Montgomery, - above cit., p. 20
18. Photograph on file with Leonis Adobe Assn.
19. Gaye, Laura B., Historian for the Leonis Adobe Assn., from her transcribed notes of an interview with Mrs. Frances Agoure, March 30, 1963, at the Adobe.
20. Gaye, - above cit.

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- Newmark, Harris - SIXTY YEARS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, Knickerbocker Press, New York, 1926
- Keefer, - HISTORY OF THE SAN FERNANDO VALLEY, Stillman Printers, Los Angeles, 1934
- Thompson and West - HISTORY OF LOS ANGELES COUNTY, Oakland 1880 republished 1960 by Howell-North, Berkeley, p. 105, refers to "McGill Leonis" as owner of Rancho El Escorpion with 1000 acres under wheat, sheep, horses, etc.

#### ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

The two-story Adobe and attached one-story wood framed structure, though somewhat altered and "restored", still retains much of the original form. The following description is based upon present observations, statements of previous owners and early records and photographs.

## EXTERIOR

Overall Dimensions: Originally about 29' x 65' with a 10' wide veranda on the south and east elevations. A 10'-3" overhanging second floor at the north side was added after 1922.

Wall Construction: 22" sundried adobe blocks set in adobe mortar, white-washed and plastered, for the two-story section. Later the ground floor and the upper floor of the west elevation were sheathed in 1 x 6, center beaded T&G vertical siding. The one-story wood framed portion to the west is of 2 x 4 studs with a board and batten siding, the bats having a "v" groove at each edge. Later additions at the north and east corner are of similar construction.

Porches: The original first and second floor verandas extended around the south, east and north sides. The first floor at the south and east is now a concrete slab; the north side had an exterior stair, now enclosed, and an open porch between it and the kitchen. The second floor veranda was finished with 1 x 4 T&G redwood boards, sloping to the exterior edges for drainage. The porch columns are spaced at an average of 8' c.c., of 6 x 6 with chamfered edges for the shaft, having a square base and square capitals with curved wood brackets at the top (similar to the Lopez Adobe, CAL-341, of about the same period). The second floor balustrade was of 1" boards with "jig-saw" pattern, set in wood moulded stops secured to the top and bottom rails, again similar to the Lopez Adobe but a little more elaborate. The ceiling of the first floor veranda is of 1 x 6 T&G boards, laid parallel with the wall and concealing 2x floor joists. The second floor porch ceiling is of exposed construction: 2 x 4 rafters extending out from the main rafters, but at a shallower pitch, at 24" c.c., with 1 x 4 cross flats at 6" c.c. supporting the original redwood shingles.

Chimneys: Brick: the original chimney is located at the west elevation of the kitchen; the interior chimney at the northeast corner of the living room was added in the 1950's.

Doorways and Doors: Softwood frames, with applied stops. The original front and rear doors are located at the south and north

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elevations respectively. They are four paneled, about 3' x 6'-9" x 2-3/8" thick at the north, and a T&G plank door at the south. The balance of later alterations are wood paneled with plain casings.

Windows: Typically double hung sash, redwood or softwood frames and easings, approximately 29" x 56" in the adobe walls (mostly original) with the wood shutters formerly on the inside but later altered on the exterior, all are now removed pending restoration work.

Roof: Pitched 2 x 4 rafters at 24" c.c., with 2 x \_ collar beams near the ridge, for the main two-story adobe portion, with hipped corners over the second floor verandas. The one-story frame section at the west has a simple shed roof of 2 x \_ rafters, with a rather shallow pitch. Originally there were exposed shingles, but now covered with rolled composition roofing. The shingles are exposed from the soffit of the second floor veranda roof.

Cornice: Edge of shingle roof and rafters extending slightly beyond a narrow wood moulded trim under and continuous fascia boards at surrounding eaves.

Miscellaneous: There are still some original hardware units for the doors which are surface mounted latchsets of cast iron, with porcelain knobs. The banister of the second floor stairway (originally exposed on the exterior north veranda) still retains a solid wood panelling of "v" grooved joints. T&G boards with decorative cut-out diamond pattern.

## INTERIOR

Floor Plan: The ground floor plan consists of a large, 16' x 34', living room in the adobe section with a wood framed section attached at the northeast corner containing a vestibule and a stairway leading to the second floor. A small room adjacent and extending under the stair was probably a storeroom. In this room immediately beyond the threshold is a 28" square scuttle in the plank flooring with a stair-ladder leading down into an earthen excavated cellar (about 8' x 15') said to have been used for storage of wine and stores. It would appear to be part of the

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original work. Attached to the west end of the adobe is a frame building, about 17'-6" x 30', which was the kitchen and dining room. To pass from the living room to the kitchen, one must go through the vestibule and originally a small exterior porch on the north, which was later enclosed.

The stairway at the northeast corner was not enclosed and led to an open veranda on the second floor which surrounded the two bedrooms in the adobe section on three sides and also led to a small wood framed bedroom at the northwest corner of the veranda. The 10' addition to the north and other bedrooms and baths of this floor were part of alterations in stages subsequent to 1922. A small hallway divided the two bedrooms of the adobe section.

Flooring: Originally, typical 1 x 4 redwood T&G planks. Later changes included hardwood for the living room, plywood and linoleum for the kitchen. Some of the original can still be seen in various areas.

Walls: The living room has 1 x 6 T&G center beaded vertical panelling over the adobe. The second floor bedrooms have plaster finish over the adobe. Most of the wood framed partitions are finished with wood lath and plaster except the second floor hall, which has 1 x 4 T&G vertical panelling. The wood finished walls, both inside and out, over the adobe are probably later additions.

Doorways and Doors: Softwood frames with 1 x 5 double beaded casings around opening. Some original doors found are of 1 x 6 solid T&G planking with 1 x 4 horizontal cross braces that fit existing 6'-4" high openings. Bedroom doors were 6'-6".

Base: Approximately 1 x 10 bases with beaded detail are found at vertical panelling on the interior or vertical siding on the exterior walls. 1 x 7 bases are found at plaster walls.

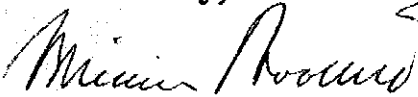
Ceilings: Living room has 1 x 6 T&G planks; second floor bedrooms in adobe section are similar, with a height of about 8'-8"; wood lath and plaster are typical for the wood framed early portions, i.e., kitchen, dining room and second floor northwest bedroom. Later rooms had drywall exposed or gyp lath and plaster.

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Hardware: Of varying periods: a few of the original exist or are at least of the late nineteenth century, which are cast iron butt hinges with elaborate design, surface mounted lath-sets, porcelain knobs; balance of recent times.

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September 1963

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DATE:

Nov 20 1963